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AUTHOR Risinger, C. Frederick
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ABSTRACT

More than 150 research studies were reviewed to develop this set of suggestions for teachers interested in effective history instruction. The suggestions are organized into four categories: (1) Teacher perceptions and behavior; (2) Student activities and cooperative learning; (3) Homework; and (4) Effective use of textbooks. A brief bibliography of some of the research studies used to compile this document is included. Some of these bibliographic entries have an Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) retrieval number for assistance in accessing these documents through ERIC. (DB)

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What Educational Research Says to Classroom History Teachers

C. Frederick Risinger, Associate Director
Social Studies Development Center
Indiana University, Bloomington

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What Educational Research Says to Classroom History Teachers

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Is there a best way to teach social studies? Probably not, but educational research has identified several classroom strategies and ways of dealing with students that seem to lead to improved achievement on tests and heightened interest in history and social studies classes. In the past decade, advances in the the techniques and tools used by educational researchers have led to substantial agreement about what works best in several areas of classroom management and curriculum structure. The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system collects, analyzes, and distributes all types of educational research findings to classroom teachers and other educators throughout the nation and the world. ERIC, a federally-funded database, has been in existence for more than two decades and because of new technology, is easier to use than ever before. In addition to research studies, ERIC contains state and local curriculum guides, exemplary teaching units and lesson plans, conference papers on new trends, and many other types of useful information. Additionally, ERIC reviews and abstracts thousands of articles in educational journals from all subject areas and from several different nations. The ERIC Clearinghouse for Social Studies/Social Science Education (ERIC/ChESS) is one of 16 content-specific divisions within the ERIC system. More information about ERIC and how it can help you is available at the end of this section.

While many of the research studies used to compile these suggestions focused solely on social studies, some were from studies done in English/language arts or science and some were conducted in general classrooms. In any case, the information can readily be applied to nearly any classroom. situation.

These ideas are taken from a workshop titled "Educational Research and Effective Social Studies Instruction" presented at more than a dozen locations throughout the nation. At nearly every workshop, one or more teachers will say, "Some of these ideas aren't new--they're just good common sense." Yet, when I ask the group if these "common sense" instructional strategies are generally used in their schools, many teachers acknowledge that they are not. While every teacher should develop his or her own instructional style and use strategies and materials that are most appropriate to the class and individual students, educational research can provide powerful support.

More than 150 research studies were reviewed to develop this set of suggestions. Some were narrowly focused and included only two or three classes in the same or nearby schools. Others were meta-research--reviews of 100 or more similar studies. I have arbitrarily divided them into four categories: (1) Teacher perceptions and behavior; (2) Student activities and cooperative learning; (3) Homework; and (4) Effective use of textbooks.

Teacher Perceptions and Behavior.

Perhaps the most important point to make is that teachers really do make a difference. In an article summarizing education in the 1980's, Diane Ravitch contends that the primary lesson learned during the "decade of educational reform" was that changing the way schools operate and improving instruction can make a difference in test scores, graduation rates, and student attitudes toward schooling and society. A review of research conducted with a group of outstanding teachers supports that view. A national search identified history teachers considered "the best" at promoting critical analysis and higher order thinking skills. These teachers worked with all ability levels of students and used somewhat different strategies. But their views of history and its purpose in society were passed along to their students. At the beginning of the study (the beginning of a year-long course in U.S. history), the students had only a vague idea of history and most viewed the topics to be studied as irrelevant or boring. At the end of the course, the students had developed ideas about history that were very close to those of the teacher. For example, the teacher who saw history as a tool for solving contemporary problems had produced students who believed that society can be improved through concerted civic action. The same was true of the other teachers. When asked questions about their ideas of history, the students' conceptions were remarkably close to those of their teacher. In his conclusion, the researcher suggested that the findings suggest that teacher conceptions may be a major determinant of the transmitted curriculum, playing a significant role in content selection, emphasis, questions raised, and pedagogy employed. Sometimes, in the hectic pace of the school year, teachers may not realize that their view of history and the way they teach may have a lasting impact on their students.

Another significant factor is the teacher's perceptions of the students. Several studies reveal that teacher expectations play a determining role in evaluation. In an intensive review of research related to ability groupings in social studies and science classes, both students and teachers accepted their placement in ability groups and reacted

accordingly. Teachers expected less of students placed on "low ability" groups and the students gave them what they wanted. No research has ever supported the idea that homogeneous grouping by ability improves student achievement. Even though a study of classroom teachers shows that a majority believe ability grouping improves teaching effectiveness, dozens of studies suggest that the practice has deleterious effects on teacher expectations and instructional practices, student self-perceptions, and academic performance of lower ability students. It interferes with opportunities for students to learn from--and learn to accept--peers of different socioeconomic backgrounds. In recent years, several major metropolitan schools systems have eliminated or drastically reduced ability grouping. For teachers working in an ability-grouped system, research indicates that the most effective techniques with students of high socio-economic status and high ability include continuous challenges for the student to do better and consistent high standards. The most effective teachers with students of low socio-economic status in low ability classes motivated students primarily with warmth and encouragement, rather than being businesslike and demanding. However, effective teachers with both groups refused to accept work that was below the assigned standard.

Hundreds of studies have tried to identify the factors that make a "good" or effective teacher. Research conducted in England and this country agree on several points. Among the most frequently-cited characteristics by students and administrators is "well-organized." Students have more confidence in the instructional abilities of teachers who maintain an orderly classroom with clearly stated rules and procedures. One study emphasized that students appreciated a classroom with various stimuli such as bulletin boards that changed with the class topics, an organized set of procedures that allowed time for class activities without seeming to be rushed, and opportunities for students to discuss the learning goals and procedures. Students in England said that a good teacher was one who, in addition to being well organized, could: (1)clearly explain assignments and lessons; (2) showed personal interest in student without calling too much attention to them; (3) used a variety of instructional techniques; and (4) made the students feel like the class was a unified group working toward a goal. They also preferred a teacher who could achieve a balance between being in control of the class and being "mean" and intimidating. The use of varied instructional techniques was also mentioned by students surveyed by the City Colleges of Chicago's Center for the Improvement of Teaching and in a major study of Australian teachers by researchers from the University of Iowa. In this latter study, "exemplary" teachers were identified by other teachers, administrators, students, and state department officials. Researchers spent weeks in the school observing the teachers and

interviewing them, their colleagues, administrators, and students. Among their conclusions, teachers who probed student responses for clarification and elaboration without embarrassing them were more likely to be considered exemplary. Other characteristics included active movement around the room and the use of independent and small group work in addition to classroom-size groupings.

While the evidence clearly shows that a variety of instructional strategies is preferred, studies suggest that many secondary teachers tend to use the least effective all too often. Yet, according to several research studies, they are not the most effective. In a study of 20,000 classrooms, one researcher ranked 15 teaching strategies as to frequency of use and effectiveness in teaching. Small group learning ranked tenth in frequency of use, yet is first in student achievement. Lecture ranked fifth in frequency of use (second among social studies teachers), and is fifteenth--dead last--in student achievement and comprehension.

The most frequently used strategy among social studies teachers is class recitation--where the teacher directs questions to individual students or the entire class and waits for a response. Several studies point out that this activity can be improved by following some simple guidelines. First, reading assignments should be accompanied by questions to guide student reading. However, the questions should not all be of the factual recall variety. Of more than 61,000 questions studied in teacher guides, textbooks, and student handouts, more than 95 percent were devoted to factual recall. Second, questions asked in class should include those which call for interpretation and opinion. A study of elementary and secondary social studies teachers indicated that factual recall questions were asked by teachers at the rate of about 1.5 per minute. The duration of student answers were directly related to the cognitive level of the question. Almost no time was spent on student-to-student discussion and very little time was spent in teacher-to-student discussion except for the exchange of the question and a brief answer. When the teacher began to ask higher order questions, the change was dramatic and immediate. Student answers were longer and more thoughtful. Their responses had a higher conceptual load and were much more likely to generate questions or discussions by other students. In a subsequent survey, both the students and the teacher reported enjoying the time spent discussing the higher order questions more than the factual recall period.

Student Activities and Cooperative Learning

There is a clear consensus on the instructional strategy that seems to be the most effective way to teach any subject--small cooperative group work. Moreover, this strategy lends itself to social studies probably better than any other subject area. Literally hundreds of studies have been conducted on this topic and small group instruction wins hands down when compared to other frequently-used instructional strategies. In a study of secondary social studies students, classroom participation was measured in five classrooms by an independent observer. Lectures and reading from the text preceded a class discussion period. Participation rates were maintained for each student who responded to teacher questions or raised questions themselves. Then, students were put into small groups which examined the central issues under study after the lectures and textbook readings. In the subsequent discussion period, many more students responded to teacher questions and the number of correct responses increased. Even more dramatic was the increased number of student-initiated questions. In another study, problem solving skills were enhanced by cooperative learning. Students who cooperated with one another during instruction were more likely to develop effective problem skills than those who worked independently or who competed with one another. A review of six cooperative learning studies suggests that the technique capitalizes on the heterogeneous nature of students in many schools today. They appear to foster better student achievement than individualistic methods, increase cross-ethnic friendships, improve students' self esteem, and lead to more positive attitudes toward other students and the school.

Teachers like cooperative learning too. A study of teachers revealed that they considered cooperation more conducive to student satisfaction and productivity than individual competitive work. The same study showed that students enjoyed cooperative work more and were more productive. Questionnaires completed at the end of the course indicated that cooperative learning techniques clarified the goals to the students while encouraging them to work toward a sense of trust, individual satisfaction, and group cohesion.

Teachers who use cooperative small group learning employ a variety of grading techniques. Of course, tests are still administered to individual students. Some teachers will give a group grade knowing that some students may have contributed to the effort than others. But as one teacher said in a workshop, "If they learn more this way than by themselves, I've achieved my goal." Another effective grading technique is to assign a

point total to the group and allow them to divide the points as they see fit. Still other teachers use cooperative groups to work on study questions, discuss issue-oriented topics, and review homework assignments; but all evaluation is still handled on an individual basis.

In other aspects of student behavior, educational research suggests that using a variety of learning techniques works best. "Hands-on" activities show increases in achievement and student satisfaction. Ten classes of middle school students used a "miniature economic and political system" in a civics class. The curriculum was based on a miniature market economy that requires students to provide food, clothing, and shelter for simulated families. Student own businesses, government officials, and a society is established. Compared with nine control classes, those participating in the simulation achieved significantly higher post-test scores. The students indicated a high level of satisfaction with the program. In a similar study using science students, one group of students were introduced to concepts using laboratory exercises followed by textbook readings and classroom discussions--the directed discovery approach. The other group learned about the concepts first through textbook readings or lecture followed by verification laboratory sessions. Results showed that students experience greater achievement and retention when the directed discovery methods were used than they did when the same concepts were taught using the laboratory activities for verification. The directed discovery groups also expressed more enjoyment of science.

In another science study that has implications for social studies, a large group of students was followed throughout their secondary years. Three teaching styles types of materials were used. Students that followed a traditional program consisting of a text, laboratories, directed teacher discussion, and exams did least well. Students that used an "innovative" curriculum emphasizing hands-on activities and student seminars did significantly better on the test. The group that performed best of all followed a program using a text supplemented by science research journals and frequent discussions between the teachers and students on <u>why</u> certain things happened during experiments and why it was important that students study that phenomenon.

Homework

There is no doubt that homework improves student achievement. However, homework can be even more effective if a few guidelines are followed. High school students in Oregon in four subject areas including U.S. history were much more likely to spend more time on their homework if they felt it was going to evaluated in a timely fashion. When teachers prepare written instructions and discuss homework assignments with the class, the students are much more likely to complete the assignment. Also, students need to see that the homework is an integral part of the course. Assignments that require students to think are more interesting and foster to learn more in and out of school. Such activities include explaining what is seen or read in class, comparing, relating, experimenting with ideas, and analyzing principles.

A study of 131 tenth-grade U.S. history classes was conducted to: (1) determine whether homework produced higher achievement; (2) determine whether there was higher achievement by students assigned "preparation" homework rather than "practice" homework; and (3) whether or not there was higher achievement by females or males in homework groups. Findings indicated that: (1) there was a significant positive difference in achievement scores between those who did and did not do homework; (2) there was no difference between those who did practice or preparation homework; and (3) there was no statistical difference in achievement between females and males within the homework groups.

Finally, it appears that asking students to write essay responses to higher order questions is the best type of homework to assign. Secondary history students were tested and grouped in comparable groups. One group of students read textbook material and then wrote analytical essays. Another group answered "short answer" questions and a third group did not write at all. All three groups participated in a teacher-led class discussion about the material in the text. Several learning measures, including sections of a standardized test, were used to compare achievement. Students who wrote outperformed the group that did not write. Students assigned the analytical essays scored higher than those who wrote short answers to questions.

Effective Use of Textbooks

How teachers and students use textbooks has not been studied as much as some other aspects of education, but the evidence is clear that there are some techniques that make the textbook a more effective learning tool. Most teachers are familiar with the SQ3R (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, Review) approach that reading instructors use to help students get the most out of a reading assignment. Students should be taught that there are different types of reading. For example, skimming can be helpful in reviewing a chapter prior to reading it or for review before a test. Study reading takes more time and has as its goal the acquisition of understanding and knowledge. Critical reading is the slowest. Here students need to stop and reflect, to compare with previously-acquired knowledge. Actually, most know about these categories, but they need to be made aware that it is acceptable to skim things when that is the most appropriate approach.

Many of the latest research studies on the use of textbooks focus on "pre-reading" or preparing students to obtain the most knowledge and understanding from an assignment. In a New Jersey study, one group of secondary students was merely assigned a textbook chapter to read. A second group was given a brief summary of the chapter by the teacher. Then, with their textbooks open, the students were told to look at headings, pictures, maps, and diagrams. The teacher pronounced and defined new vocabulary terms that would appear in the reading and noted names of people and places in the chapter. Additionally, the teacher briefly described how the new chapter fit within the course framework. As you might expect, there was a significant positive difference in favor of the pre-reading group on an achievement test. The teacher spent no more than five minutes each day, yet the difference in achievement was tremendous. While this aspect was not tested, I suspect that the group given the pre-reading treatment was more likely to actually read the assignment.

While this might appear to be one of those "common sense" research findings mentioned earlier, other studies that many teachers simply assign the page numbers to be read by the next day. Today's textbooks are filled with pictures, maps, tables, and other graphics. Significant information is included in the captions or legends to these features and in special features apart from the regular text. Yet, many students simply pass over these items and concentrate only on the reading. By encouraging students to read all parts of the textbook, teachers can help students get the most from it.

A brief bibliography of many of the research studies used to compile this section follows. In most cases, a number beginning with ED or EJ appears. That is the ERIC retrieval number--ED refers to a document such as a research study. EJ refers to an educational journal where a study might have appeared as an article. the ERIC system is one of the most helpful, yet underused resources available for classroom teachers. For more information about ERIC including how to order documents and the location of ERIC collections near you, call ACCESS ERIC at 1-800-USE-ERIC. To contact ERIC/ChESS. the clearinghouse dealing specifically with history and social studies, phone (812) 855-3838 or write ERIC/ChESS, 2805 East 10th. Street, Suite 120, Bloomington, Indiana 47408.

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